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## Short Subjects: The Paperless Office: Hope for the Future or a Grand Illusion?

Susan A. Chapdelaine

*Metcalf and Eddy, Inc.*

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## SHORT SUBJECTS



### Features

#### **The Paperless Office: Hope for the Future or a Grand Illusion?**

**Susan A. Chapdelaine**

All records, policies, procedures, documents, references--even learning resources--will be online. No more paper, just pure accessible information!<sup>1</sup>

Despite this early promise of the paperless office, the volume of paper in corporate offices continues to grow annually at alarming rates. Advances in technology have not eliminated paper

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Bender, "The Promise of a Paperless Workplace," *Optical Storage* (Fall 1987), 24.

from the office environment but have actually increased the amount of paper which is generated. Paperwork continues to be the largest overhead expense in business today. Consider the following:

Corporate offices in the United States experience an estimated eight percent increase in paper generation annually.

Each employee creates an average of two cubic feet of paper per year.

Over fifty percent of the paper generated are duplicate copies.<sup>2</sup>

Much of this increase in paper generation can be attributed to the advances in technology itself. For example, high speed laser printers now can produce lengthy reports at the touch of a button, and convenience copiers enable duplicate copies of records to exist at multiple locations. Added to these technological advances is the continued cultural preference for the paper document and resistance to the paperless society.

Clearly the concept of the paperless office has failed. Technology has not, and in all likelihood will never bring about a truly paperless office. But despite this fact the impact that technology has had on transforming the way in which modern corporations and organizations conduct business cannot be discounted. Technology has revolutionized the way information is created, transmitted, stored, and accessed. These changes have in turn affected the way information is managed and will ultimately be preserved.

In 1987 the Association of Information and Image Management (formerly the American Micrographics Association) commissioned Coopers and Lybrand to conduct a study of the status and future

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<sup>2</sup> Herb Schwartz and Mary F. Ryan, "Corporations Slow to Embrace Electronic Record Keeping," *InformationWEEK* (3 June 1985), 51.

of information and image management.<sup>3</sup> During the course of the study underlying technologies, available products, typical applications, and future developments were examined. The study's findings show that despite technological advances in recent years ninety-five percent of all information is still in paper form, four percent is on some type of microform, and only one percent of all information is recorded in an electronic format.

Despite these findings, the study forecasts significant changes over the next decade as developments in imaging technology, and particularly optical based storage technology, will have a major impact on the office environment and will significantly alter the way in which records are stored. If these conclusions hold true, the coming years will witness the emergence of a multi-media office environment. Businesses will continue to utilize traditional media and mature technology, including paper and microforms, and will integrate these with newer imaging technologies--particularly optical base storage systems.

This diversification of information sources and formats intensifies the need to manage information efficiently within a business or organizational environment. Yet uncertainties remain as to who within an organization should play a leadership role in the management of this information. In many organizations MIS (Management Information Systems) personnel are given the primary responsibility for the management of information resources. But too often MIS and data processing professionals are more concerned with the vast amounts of information that can be created and manipulated using data processing and telecommunication equipment than with the need to control the information they are creating. It is interesting to observe that the data processing profession has adopted the verb "to archive" in their vocabulary, but in a data processing environment it means little more than the downloading of data to tape or disk and the storage of the media. Seldom, if ever, is the concern given to the long-

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<sup>3</sup> Coopers and Lybrand, *Information and Image Management: The Industry and the Technology*, (n.p.: Association of Information and Image Management, 1987).



term preservation of the information contained on that media--at least not until it is needed and can not be retrieved.

There are increasing signs that corporate management is beginning to recognize the value of information resources. Publications like *Megatrends*, *The Information Edge*, and *Infotrends* point to the rise of the information society and discuss how corporations can improve their competitive advantage through the effective management of their information resources. Information is beginning to be viewed as a corporate asset in the same manner as financial and human resources. Recognizing this fact, corporations now see the emergence of the position of "chief information officer" among the ranks of upper management and the development of broad based information management programs which incorporate strategic planning for information systems.

How do archivists and records managers deal with the changes in information technology and what role should they play in its management? Their reaction and ability to adapt to changing technology will determine the role which they assume in the information environment. They can and should play an active role. Changes in information technology at last present an opportunity for archivists and records managers to prove to management the value and immediacy of the services provided.

To deal effectively with these changes in technology, archivists and records managers need to change their focus from the management of records to management of information regardless of the format in which it appears. It is essential for management to realize that although the processes and information formats may change, the need to manage information is not eliminated and that, in fact, the need becomes more critical.

Unfortunately, archival attitudes toward technology have in the past been motivated by fear or resistance, viewing technology as a problem to be contained rather than an opportunity to be grasped. The result has been a lack of recognition of archivists' expertise and the failure on the part of management to recognize the value of the service that they perform. Archivists and records managers have not yet learned to capitalize on the skills that they possess.

Archivists and records managers have always been concerned with information--in preserving and making available information which documents the activities of the organizations they represent. Archival and records management training programs teach about the life cycle concept of records, but in practice both groups continue to focus on the end of the cycle. Records managers develop retention schedules which establish the disposition of records, but say little about the management and control of the records as they are created and actively used. Archivists focus on appraisal, description and preservation but seldom become involved in other aspects of the life cycle--particularly the creation and active use of information.

To have an impact in today's information economy, archivists and records managers must take a proactive approach to information management. They cannot afford to wait until they are asked to participate. They must immediately begin to expand their scope of services and become involved in systems planning, analysis, and implementation by stressing the interrelationships among data management and records and archives management.

There are many things that archivists and records managers can begin to do in order to position themselves to play an active role in information management. The first is to understand the organization for which they work. While this may seem like an obvious point to most archivists, it really is not. Before the information needs of an organization can be analyzed, the archivist first must understand the organization itself. An accurate assessment of its information needs can not be obtained without a thorough understanding of its basic purposes and functions. This must go beyond a basic knowledge of the history of the organization, which is fundamental to archival appraisal. It is necessary to understand fully the organization and its business, its decision-making process, and the nature of day-to-day operations.

The questions that need to be answered include: What kind of work does the organization do? What is its purpose and strategic direction? How has the organization grown and changed? Why has it branched out in one direction and not another? What is its marketing strategy? What kinds of information are generated

of the information economy present a chance to change these misconceptions and stereotypes which have become all too familiar.

The Coopers and Lybrand study has predicted the emergence of a new discipline called "Information Resource Management," which will incorporate data processing, office automation, communications, and information and image management.<sup>5</sup> Nowhere in the study is there mention of the role of archivist or records managers. If their predictions on the rapid growth and changes in the information society hold true, archivist and records managers must begin now to assert themselves and demonstrate the valuable contributions which can be made. The choice of involvement or noninvolvement is up to them.

**Susan A. Chapdelaine** is Corporate Records Manager at Metcalf and Eddy, Inc., an engineering design firm in Boston, Massachusetts. She is president of the Boston chapter of ARMA (Association of Records Managers and Administrators). This article is adapted from a paper given on 26 March 1988 at the New England Archivists Annual Meeting, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

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<sup>5</sup> Coopers and Lybrand, 39-40.



will show the relationships between various information formats and accurately reflect the functions of the organization.

A fourth step is to get involved in the planning process. Records management and archival issues are rarely considered in the development of automated information systems. If archivists do not take the initiative of making planners aware of these issues, no one will. It is important to get to know the people in the information services and MIS departments and make them aware of records management and archival issues and concerns. Records managers and archivists can bring a unique perspective to such a planning process.

The last step, of all the steps outlined above is perhaps the most important and that is to maintain a positive attitude. Information technology is not something to be avoided or feared. Changes in office automation and technology will greatly enhance the accessibility of information if it is properly managed. Archivists and records managers have the skills needed to manage this wealth of information. It is now time for them to show their organizations how proper management of information resources will enhance the organizations' effectiveness and increase their competitive edge!

Archivists must recognize that none of this can be accomplished overnight. When they are faced with tremendous backlogs of work and shortages of staff and funding, it is often easy to delay involvement or to ignore the problem altogether. But these are the very reasons why archivists must make the time to pursue these activities.

The well-publicized *Levy Report* issued by the Society of American Archivists's Task Force on Archives and Society<sup>4</sup> concluded that resource allocators hold archival work and the profession in high regard, but see no sense of urgency and feel that archivists have adequate funding and staff. The opportunities presented by the advances in information technology and the rise

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<sup>4</sup> Sidney J. Levy and Albert C. Robles, *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984).



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